

CRUCIAL
QUESTIONS

A RADIO BIBLE CLASS PUBLICATION

What Is a Personal Relationship With God?



GOD: Knowing Him



What Is a Personal Relationship With God? What

does it mean when a person claims to have a personal relationship with God? Would you claim that for yourself? Does anyone really hear from God, talk to God, or have the kind of inside track with Him that would justify such a claim? At what point does claiming to be a friend of God amount to nothing more than an outrageous form of name-dropping?

It is my hope that the following pages will help to clarify this issue for you. None of us can afford to misunderstand this subject, which is as basic as it is profound.

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Contents

You Mean You Talk to God?	2
Where Does Such an Idea Come From?	3
How Could I Forget?	4
Does It Help To Be Religious?	5
What Is a Personal Relationship With God?	6
A Spiritual Relationship.....	7
A Christ-Centered Relationship	11
A Dominant Relationship	15
A Mutually Felt Relationship	18
A Growing Relationship.....	22
A Shared Relationship.....	28
Are You Close . . . Yet So Far Away?	32

You Mean You Talk to God?

"What do you mean there is no God? I just talked to Him this morning." This message borne by a well-faded bumper sticker has nudged a few smiles along the way. But not today. One car-length back, the driver of a late-model Cadillac curses under his breath about being stuck behind a sluggish Toyota in heavy traffic. He's even more irritated having to eat the fumes of a religious fanatic. He doesn't find the sticker funny, or cute, or even honest. He has a hard time with those who talk so casually about:

- Meeting God
- Knowing God
- Hearing God
- Talking to God
- Being led by God

It's not that the driver of the big car doesn't believe in God. Like most people, he's no atheist. He knows what the inside of a church looks like. His wife is very religious. And without her knowledge, he has even asked heaven for a little extra consideration from time to time when facing a tough business deal or even a critical shot on the golf course. Sure he prays, but he's not about to claim that he has a personal relationship with God. And he's suspicious of those who do. He suspects that they are indulging in the ultimate kind of name-dropping. These people aren't satisfied to ride on the reputations of other people. They claim to know God Himself in a way that others do not.

Where Does Such an Idea Come From?

The Bible doesn't refer to a personal relationship with God. Not in those exact words. But it does show the importance of learning to know, love, and trust a very *personal* God. While you won't find the words *personal relationship* in the Bible, the idea is everywhere. Page after page suggests that it is *who* you know that counts, and that the *who* you need to know is God.

Furthermore, the Bible gives us reason to believe that we can't afford just to know *about* this God—we need to know Him personally. Even more important, we need to be known by Him. We need to avoid the living nightmare of those who someday will be turned away from the gates of heaven by a God they claim to know, but a God who will declare that He never knew them.

To be known by God will someday be all that matters. "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matt. 7:22,23).

To know God is the primary purpose and privilege of this life and the next. "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). This eternal life begins with a personal introduction to God through Christ (John 5:24).

How Could I Forget?

One afternoon my wife called me at the office and asked me to get some information for her. She said she would hold the line. It was a simple matter, but in the process someone caught me in the hallway with a question. That led to a discussion, then another—until suddenly it hit me. I forgot that my wife was on the line, waiting! I felt a sudden rush of embarrassment and ran back to the phone, wondering what I was going to find on the other end. She was still there, wondering what had happened and a lot more patient than she had reason to be.

“ Could we have forgotten the most important Person in our life? ”

In seeking to explore the meaning of a personal relationship with God, we can't afford to overlook the obvious. Perhaps there was a time when we made a conscious decision to trust God and live for Him. But since then we have become so preoccupied with the things that we can see and touch that we have let Him slip from our minds. If this is true, we need to remember the brokenhearted, infinite, personal One who loves us and once before said to His people, "Have I been a wilderness to Israel, or a land of darkness? Why do My people say, 'We are lords; we will come no more to You'? Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number" (Jer. 2:31,32).

How could that happen? How could we forget?

Does It Help To Be Religious?

Most people would probably agree that it's good to go to church, take communion, confess your sins, sing hymns, do volunteer work, and try to keep the Ten Commandments. It may be good, but it's not enough. In fact, it can be very dangerous.

When the Lord told His people they had forgotten Him (Jer. 2:32), He was not saying that they had stopped being religious. That was not their problem. Their problem was that they were using their religion as a substitute for a personal relationship with God.

“ Religion may well be our most dangerous distraction. ”

Many of us make the same mistake. We break God's heart by hiding from Him in church, or even between the pages of His Book. Instead of using the Bible as a means of communing heart to heart with God, we pull comfort from the sacred page to soothe our hurting consciences. Rather than using worship to draw near to the Lord, we merely go to church to feel better about ourselves.

Such religion must sadden our Lord. We give Him our attendance, our gifts, and our praise. But all too often we don't give Him our hearts. We, like Jesus' countrymen, draw close to God with our lips, but our hearts are far from Him (Matt. 15:8,9). God has not forgotten us, but we have forgotten Him.

What Is a Personal Relationship With God?

A personal relationship with God has many of the same characteristics that mark a personal relationship between two friends. These factors include some degree of:

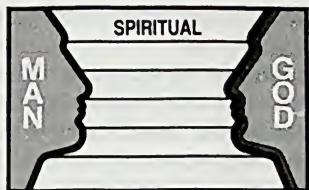
- Mutual recognition—each knows the other.
- Mutual openness—each can approach the other.
- Mutual interests—each shares with the other.
- Mutual respect—each honors the other.

Another way of describing a personal relationship is to say that it is a mind-to-mind, heart-to-heart, decision-to-decision relationship.

For example, I might say that I know the governor of Texas. But if the chief officer of that state can't pick me out of a crowd, if I can't get access to him, or if we have never shared our thoughts, feelings, and decisions, then I am claiming a friendship I don't really have.

A personal relationship means more than knowing *of* or *about* someone. This is why Jesus said that the day will come when He will have to tell certain people who claim to know Him that He never knew them (Matt. 7:23). He won't be saying that He never heard about them. His point will be that He doesn't recognize them as His own servants and children. He will know *about* them; but since He had never been invited home with them, He will not claim them as His friends.

With that in mind, let's look closer at what it means to have a personal relationship with God.



A SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

There are those who claim to have met God visibly, heard Him speak audibly, and felt Him touch them physically.

Certainly, in some cases, it is possible. In the past, God has appeared to individuals in that way (Is. 6:1-8). The Old Testament and the New are marked by such miraculous, life-changing experiences. We certainly can't decide for God that He is not free to show Himself in any way He chooses.

We must remember, however, that these biblical encounters were the exception rather than the rule for the people of God. Never were they promoted as normal or necessary for a relationship with God. Never were such claims to be a reason for departing from the clearly marked path of Scripture. Never should someone's claim of a personal encounter with God substitute for focusing on the written Word of God as a means of getting to know Him in a personal way.

The assumption of this study, then, is that a personal relationship with God is first of all an experience of the mind and heart. Physical encounters, while possible, are not to be expected or even looked for. While I believe God has spoken to me, I have never heard an audible voice. While I am confident that God is at work in my life, I have never seen Him in person. While I have sensed that God was doing something deep in my heart, I have never felt a physical touch, surge, or shock. A *normal* relationship with God depends on God's

supernatural ability to relate to us with or without our physical senses.

To meet God doesn't mean we have to see Him visibly. We shouldn't wait for bright lights, auras, or life-changing dreams. We must expect to encounter Him with the eyes and ears of our mind and heart. That might seem very vague and unverifiable. But because God is the all-powerful, ever-present Spirit, He reveals Himself to us at a deeper level than that of our physical senses (Acts 17:26-28; 1 Pet. 1:8,9). The God who made the world is more than able to reveal the truth about Himself to the heart and mind of anyone who wants to know Him (John 7:17; Eph. 1:17,18).

“The God who made the world has no trouble being seen and heard by those who honestly want to know Him.”

To hear God doesn't mean we have to hear Him audibly. There are times when we might wish God would break the silence and at least whisper something in our ear. Or, maybe we're glad that He doesn't. In either case, it is not necessary for Him to do so. If we hear only silence, it is our own self-imposed silence. We can hear the Lord speak anytime we want. We can hear Him do so through the pages of His Book, the Bible. In that way, the Lord is constantly talking to us. He is on record in a book that expresses His thoughts, His desires, His plans, His values, His warnings, His promises, and His offers and invitations to us.

For that reason, we need to take very seriously the words of the author of Hebrews who wrote, "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion' " (3:7,8). Our opportunity to hear Him on every page of the Bible is an inexpressible privilege that carries with it a great degree of responsibility.

To be close to God is not a matter of location. It is common to think that we must go to church to meet God. That makes sense. We meet people at certain addresses. Maybe we can and do meet Him at His house. Yet with God it is different. He promises to meet us in places of the heart. He wants us to make our hearts His home.

“God is as close as a humbled heart.”

James recognized this when he said, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). He didn't say anything about where to go. He didn't tell us to find the highest hill in our area, or the quietest church sanctuary. Instead, James told us to humble ourselves before the Lord (4:10). He gives us reason to believe that wherever we do so, there the Lord will meet with us.

David, the songwriter, king, and "man after God's own heart," shows us why this is true. Deeply humbled by the Lord's constant, unavoidable presence (Ps. 139:1-6), he prayed, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I

make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. . . . If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall fall on me,' even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You. . . . When I awake, I am still with You" (Ps. 139:7,8,11,12,18). Nearness to God is not an issue of location. It is a matter of whether we have place in our hearts for Him.

To know God is not a matter of knowing all about Him. That might be the greatest understatement of all. Only the most arrogant person would claim to have God figured out. To know God is not to master Him. At best, we can exclaim with the apostle Paul in Romans 11:33,34:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?"

“Those who meet God now will have eternity to get to know Him.”

Given the limitations of this life, our minds can barely begin to grasp the meaning of words that describe God—words like *eternal, infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere-present*. Yet we can know God and be known by Him. This is because He revealed Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ, who said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). It is through Christ that God revealed to us as much about Himself as we need to know to have a personal relationship with Him. So, not only is a personal relationship

with God a spiritual relationship, it is a Christ-centered relationship, which is our next point.



A CHRIST-CENTERED RELATIONSHIP

Mediators often play an important role in helping to resolve family, labor, and legal disputes. When emotions flare, perspective is lost, communication stops, and stubbornness sets in. In such instances, an arbitrator can often bring renewed perspective and a plan for resolution.

The ultimate mediator is Christ. Nowhere is a personal go-between more needed than in resolving the conflict and estrangement between man and God. Our personal sin has dug out a chasm so deep and wide that it is impossible for any of us to gain access to God on our own. Without a mediator, we can never overcome the alienation of affection and disruption of communication that have come between us.

God is in some ways like a parent who watches his runaway son or daughter become hopelessly entangled with the law. As much as the parent would love to wrap his arms around the child and bring him home, he can't. The law has to be satisfied. Justice must be carried out. A debt to society must be paid and a law must be enforced. It is for a need far more complex than this that Christ has come as a mediator and peacemaker (1 Tim. 2:5). It is to bring peace between ourselves and God.

There is no way that mere words can do justice to the importance of the mediating role of Christ.

Without His intervention on our behalf, there is no way we can ever resolve our differences with God (John 14:6). Furthermore, without the urging of His loving Spirit we would never want to. No one else can remove our debt to God's law (1 Cor. 1:13; Gal 3:13). No one else can ever do what Christ has done for us.

“ If Christ is not the focus of our lives, then our relationship with God is either nonexistent or very shallow. ”

For that reason, the Lord Jesus Christ should continually be in our thoughts. He should receive our unending appreciation, admiration, and affection. The fact that He has wiped out our debt to the law by absorbing punishment on our behalf should cause us to feel an unending debt of love to Him. That He has risen from the dead to be life and help to all who trust Him should give us hope as nothing else can. That He is at the Father's right hand interceding for us and acting as our personal advocate should cause us to feel truly secure and safe. He is providing for us what no mere religion or system of belief could ever offer. He has given us Himself to be the personal solution to our every problem, to reveal God to us, and to lead us to a personal relationship with His Father.

Christianity is Christ. As W. H. Griffith Thomas points out in a book by this title, this is the real heart of our Christian faith. We have not been called to a system of laws, traditions, and inspira-

tional ideas. We haven't been called to the church, to a moral cause, or to the golden rule of Christian love. We have not even been called to the Bible. We have been called to Christ, the mediating person of whom the whole Bible speaks.

“ Everything we know of God, and everything we need from Him is deeply affected by our attitude toward Christ. ” —W. H. Griffith Thomas

The apostle Paul understood this. In chapters 1–9 of 1 Corinthians, he made it clear that he was not promoting a system of ideas. He was speaking of a relationship to God based on:

- Christ whom we serve (1).
- Christ who sets Christians apart (2).
- Christ on whose name Christians call (2).
- Christ who is our Lord (2).
- Christ who with God wants the best for us (3).
- Christ who brought us the grace of God (4).
- Christ who has enriched us in every way (5).
- Christ who is confirmed by experience (6).
- Christ for whom we eagerly wait (7).
- Christ who will keep us to the end (8).
- Christ who will have His day (8).
- Christ to whom God has joined us (9).

Paul's subject was not a system of new thought, an ethic, a teaching, a form of church organization, or a new program. It was the person Paul had come to know as the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). It was the person who had not only died to pay for Paul's sins (1 Cor. 15:3),

but also the person who, through His Spirit, was living His life through Paul (Gal. 2:20) and was his very life (Phil. 1:21).

“ Jesus Christ received is holiness begun. Jesus Christ cherished is holiness advancing. But Jesus Christ reckoned as never absent would be holiness complete. ”

—J. Hudson Taylor

Are we that Christ-centered? Do we realize with the apostle Paul that true Christianity is found in the living person and personality of the resurrected Christ? Have we learned that Christ is and must be at the heart of a personal relationship with God? Have we realized that no matter where we look, Christ is there?

- Look back—He is our Creator (Col. 1:16).
- Look ahead—He is our Judge (2 Cor. 5:10).
- Look up—He is Savior and Lord (Phil.2:5-10).
- Look down—He is our Sustainer (Col. 1:17).
- Look right—He is our Teacher (Matt. 23:8).
- Look left—He is our Advocate (1 John 2:1).
- Look within—He is our Life (Gal. 2:20).

There is no question that a personal relationship with God must be a Christ-centered relationship. It is Christ and Christ alone who can bring us to God, cleanse us from the constant pollution of the world, and be our ever-present Source of life and help.

It is Christ who, as the living Word, reveals, de-

finer, and expresses the personality of the Father. It is Christ who should constantly be in our thoughts as Lord and Life. It is Christ who, by His Spirit, is a constant Presence in and with all who have put their faith in Him (Mark 16:19,20).



A DOMINANT RELATIONSHIP

Any husband who is content to be just "one of the boys" in his wife's eyes isn't much of a husband. Neither is a woman much of a wife if she is satisfied to be just "one of the girls." The intimacy of the marriage relationship carries with it a great sense of mutual commitment that will have a bearing on all of the couple's other activities and relationships.

For far greater reasons, the Designer of human personality is also not satisfied to be just "one of the gods" (Ex. 20:1-6). Yahweh, Provider and Deliverer of Israel, the God who came to us in Jesus the Messiah, will not accept a place on the shelf alongside Ra, Krishna, Moon, Allah, GM, or CBS. He has always been a jealous, possessive, commanding God. He will not share His honor with anyone else because no one else deserves that honor (Is. 48:11).

God is to be feared more than all others. Most of us don't even like to think about things that frighten us. Whether we're talking about public speaking, high places, cramped spaces, dark nights, noises at the door, or creaks in the attic, the very thought can make us jumpy. Yet without fear, life would be very difficult. Even the animal world is endowed with an alarm and escape mech-

anism that provides the creature some degree of fight or flight necessary for survival.

At no time, however, is the emotion of fear more important or more neglected than when it involves our fear of God. To the extent that we know Him, we will also fear Him. Yet it is a fear, when rightly understood, that drives us to the Lord, not away from Him. It is a fear that will enable us to love, trust, and enjoy Him.

“A relationship with God begins with a fear that will drive us to the safety, certainty, and enjoyment of His love.”

This fear might be described as the first step to a personal relationship with God. According to Solomon, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). In other words, the fear and knowledge of God go hand in hand.

Nothing and no one deserves to be feared more than the Lord. Not people, not governments, not disease, not death, not even Satan. Many who don’t know God can’t understand this. They assume that the Lord is the only one in the universe who *doesn’t* need to be feared because He is too good and too loving to do us any harm. The ironic result is that such persons often end up missing that very love with lives full of fear—fear of failure, fear of people, fear of natural disasters, and fear of accident, disease, and death (Deut. 28:58-68).

Those who really know the Lord, on the other hand, take Him seriously. They realize that God ex-

pects to be listened to when He warns about moral and spiritual failure (Prov. 8:13; 16:6). He alone determines whether anything or anyone else will be allowed to touch or test us (Job 1); and most important, He alone determines where we will spend eternity (Matt. 10:28; Rev. 2:10; 20:1-15). Such authority deserves our respect and fear.

Although we reverence God and stand in awe of His great power, at the same time we can have strong confidence (Prov. 14:26). With David we can say, "I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears" (Ps. 34:4). A couple of verses later David added, "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him! Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him" (Ps. 34:7-9).

“ You’ll know you have the right fear of God when it drives you to Him rather than away from Him. ”

That comes from someone who knew his God. It comes from someone who personally experienced that the God who wants to possess and dominate our lives needs to be known in reverential fear so that we can learn to trust and love Him. He is a God who wants us to fear Him for our own good (Jer. 32:37-39). It is a fear that will cause us to run from self-destruction to the Lord.

God is to be loved, trusted, and obeyed more than all others. Obedience, like fear, is

something we tend to resist. Yet, seeing the importance of such obedience is just a matter of perspective. For example, most of us are happy to obey a stranger's directions when we're in an unknown area. We don't even think of it as obedience. We see it more like accepting help. That's the way we should look at obedience to the Lord. It is a way of accepting His help and His love that we so desperately need. Obedience is a way of showing that we really do know the Lord and that we are growing in our knowledge of how good, loving, and wise He is.

“The one who says ‘I know God’ but does not keep His commands is, according to the Bible, a liar.”

The apostle John wrote:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked (1 John 2:3-6).

The fear, trust, and obedience involved in knowing the Lord do not leave us the way we were. They make us better because of the new Person within. They change us until this relationship possesses us and dominates us—bringing us heart to heart and face to face with the God of all goodness and light.



A MUTUALLY FELT RELATIONSHIP

Roadworn, pawsore, and unnerved by children's stones and the nervous insults of small pampered housedogs,

the German Shepherd followed the stranger from a safe distance. Head low, and with an occasional look to the side, he stepped lightly and painfully in the tracks of the man who had thrown him half a bagel near the garbage bins of Blue's Diner. Cold, stiff, tired, hungry for more, and longing for a friend, the dog watched the stranger's every move, waiting for one more sign of recognition, the faintest chance for friendship. But it never came.

Does that remind you of the kind of loneliness you have felt? Have you longed to touch someone's heart and ached inside to see him smile and move toward you—but you didn't receive the invitation to do so? As far as you were concerned, he might as well have been a statue at city-center park. Sometimes we see God like that. Our feelings tell us that the Creator is like a stranger whose eyes meet ours only long enough to make us feel left outside.

But that is not true of the God of the Bible. The Scriptures make it clear that those who know God are involved in a relationship that results in mutual changes of the heart. While God's character never changes, His heart does.

To know God is to affect God. While God knew us, loved us, and chose us along with all His people in eternity past (Eph. 1:3-6), He relates to us personally and presently in a very intimate way.

He rejoices with us when we are happy, sorrows when we are sad, and grieves when we are bad.

He has made Himself just that vulnerable to us. He has exposed His own heart to all of the loveless and heartless things that we do to Him. The Bible tells us that God can be:

- Pleased (Heb. 11:5).
- Grieved and sorrowful (Gen. 6:6; Eph. 4:30-32).
- Provoked and tested (Ps. 78:40,41).
- Burdened and wearied (Is. 43:24).
- Angered, agitated, and furious (Ezek. 16:42,43).

Specifically, Ephesians 4:30-32 says, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you."

“ The amazing thing is that God loves us enough to make Himself vulnerable to the pain we cause Him. ”

The greatest evidence of His decision to make Himself vulnerable to us is found in the personal pains and sorrows of the One who with His own mind and heart revealed the Father to us. In the face of Jesus Christ, we find the face of God. He is the One who suffered for us in order to bring us to the Father. He loves us that much!

It might be hard for you to personalize that kind of love when you know that you are only one per-

son in a world of more than 5 billion people. But keep in mind who we are talking about. God is not like us in His limitations. He is not confined to human, one-at-a-time relationships. Rather, the One who made the world is able to relate intimately to as many of us at the same time as He desires.

How do we know this? Scripture teaches the unlimited knowledge and heart of God. And Jesus confirmed this when He said:

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matt. 10:29-31).

If His disciples are of more value than many sparrows, to whom are they of more value? They are of value to God, the One who numbers the hairs on our head, the One who must give approval before a sparrow is allowed to fall to the ground. How much more concerned He must be about us!

To know God is to be affected by God. When we are close to God, we will grieve over our sin and enter into the sorrow He experiences because of our waywardness. The apostle James described such a personal relationship like this:

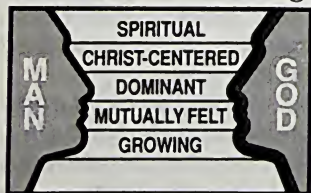
Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up (4:7-10).

Here we see the kind of mutual responsiveness that marks a personal relationship with God. If we don't find ourselves being moved by the things that move God, then to that extent we do not know Him in an intimate way. You cannot know God and remain unmoved by Him.

To know God is to love Him. It means giving Him first place in our own hearts. It means mourning what He mourns, hating what He hates, loving what He loves. It means caring about Him enough to want to bring delight to Him, to please Him, to honor Him!

“ To develop a personal relationship with God means to learn to love what He loves and hate what He hates. ”

In this respect, then, a personal relationship with God is a mutually affecting relationship. It means that we bring about responses in the heart of God even as He brings about changes in us.



A GROWING RELATIONSHIP

Can we say a newborn baby in the hospital nursery has a personal relationship with his parents? The way we answer that question will tell a lot about our approach to this subject. The answer is yes, even though it might seem to contradict other things we are saying about intimacy.

The personal relationship between that child and his mother and father is very powerful. This is their baby—flesh of their flesh and bone of their bone—and born out of the oneness that they share. The fact that the child is virtually oblivious to his surroundings is beside the point. What is important is that he is known by his parents. That is far more important than whether he knows them.

“To be known by God is far more important than the meager extent to which we know Him.”

This is also true of the early stages of spiritual life. It is more important for God to know us as His own than for us to know much about Him. This is because God knows infinitely more about us than we will ever know about Him.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasized the fact that God knows us. While calling attention to the Galatians' spiritual ignorance of the God who had called them to Himself, Paul wrote:

Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements (i.e. ceremonial law), to which you desire again to be in bondage (4:6-9).

This passage reinforces what we have suggested: To be known *by* God is more important than whether we claim to know Him (Matt. 7:21-23). He must be able to look at each of us and say, "Yes, that's My child. I gave birth to that one."

Galatians 4:6-9 also suggests the developmental process of growth and change that occurs in this relationship with the Lord. The Christians in Galatia were in many ways like little children. Their spiritual immaturity was seen by the fact that they needed to be corrected, warned, encouraged, and taught as they moved through the long process of growing up.

Babies don't know much. Even though they are able almost immediately to begin recognizing the voice and touch of their mother, the relationship is very basic. It takes years for them to develop a mature relationship and an intimate understanding of their parents. Much of it will not occur until the child becomes a parent himself. Only then will he have the capacity to begin to understand some of the thoughts and feelings of his parents. The same is true of a new child of God. We must cultivate a long process of progressive, incomplete, changing knowledge of Him.

Plan for progress. Growing to maturity takes time. It also takes a sense of balance. On one hand, we must never be satisfied with the level of our relationship and knowledge of God. If we do, we'll stagnate, sour, and go backward. On the other hand, we must be very patient with ourselves and not expect more than God expects of us.

Scripture shows that this maturity doesn't happen overnight. It requires time—time with God,

and time in His Word. For that reason Peter wrote, "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious" (1 Pet. 2:2,3). James supported the progressive nature of this relationship with God when he wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (1:2-4).

“The only thing worse than a child who is dressed and acting like an adult is an adult who is dressed and acting like a child.”

A relationship with God takes time. Don't rush the process. But don't let it stop. Continue to feed on the Word of God even as you allow Him to show Himself faithful in the seasons, tests, and troubles of life. Don't expect perfection. You will fail. Be content to be learning and growing. Don't be like the homeowner who planted a garden, only to dig it up 2 weeks later because he didn't have tomatoes yet.

Expect change. Because of the very nature of spiritual life, your relationship with the Lord will change. It will change because as you go forward you will always find more—more knowledge and experience of God that will stretch you, enlarge your heart, and make you better.

Your relationship with God, however, will also

change if you begin to coast and rely on past experiences with Him. You must expect change because your relationship with Him is by nature a contested issue. Your adversary, the devil, won't be satisfied until he neutralizes you and you slip into a spiritual coma (Eph. 6:10-13).

Even though your personal relationship with God can never be lost, the characteristics of that relationship will change. You will change. Count on it. Your heart will either grow warmer or colder. Your character will either deepen or thin out. Your conversations with God will either become more intimate or they will become less meaningful and less frequent.

“Of this you can be sure. Your relationship with the Lord will change. It will either change for the better or for the worse. But it will change.”

It was because of such changes that the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. He had seen them change. They had started with Christ, but at some point they had been distracted. They had turned from personal involvement with Him to a reinvolved with impersonal laws and ceremonies (Gal. 3:1-3; 4:9).

Allow for incompleteness. Speaking of our incomplete relationship with God, Paul said:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. . . . For

now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:9,10,12,13).

That's the realism we're faced with. Now our knowledge and experience are incomplete. It is as if we are looking at the face of God through a clouded glass. Then it will be face to face. In the meantime, we have our orders. We must accept our incompleteness, trust God, and put our hope in His imminent return. We are to love God and His very imperfect family with all of our heart. Don't demand perfection of yourself. Don't demand it of others. As we press for growth in our relationship with God, we need to jettison our perfectionism and replace it with faith, hope, and love.

Don't expect heaven now. Not only is it very important for us to give ourselves time to grow in the Lord, but it is also essential that we take time to let Him show Himself absolutely faithful and satisfying to us. But don't expect in this life what He has promised to complete in eternity.

We who trust in Christ are people of eternity. There are no time limits on our future. We are not like the professional athlete who has to reach his goals and make his money and a name for himself in just a few short years before he loses his competitive edge.

Having a relationship with God is not a way to get everything we want in life. It is not the key to financial success, good health, and long life. It is, however, the way to find increasing amounts of inner love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, good-

ness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22,23). It is a means of finding the ultimate relationship, the ultimate purpose, the ultimate mission, the ultimate security, the ultimate hope.

All that remains for us is to trust Christ for what we cannot now see or have. We need to believe that what Christ said to His disciples is still true:

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:1-3).

That is our hope. We should not expect the Lord to give us everything we crave now. While He has promised to provide for the needs of all who follow Him, He also reserves the right to determine what we need now and what we will be able to enjoy more if it is deferred until later.



A SHARED RELATIONSHIP

We all come to God one at a time. In a sense, we come all alone. It is our personal decision, our choice, whether or not

we are willing to enter into a personal relationship with God. No one else makes this decision for us. But it doesn't stop there. Once we come to God, we are joined to Him and born into His family.

Those who love God will love one another. It is impossible to have a personal relationship with God without also having Christ-centered relation-

ships with other people. Christ's love shown on the cross is our example. He showed us that to be close to the Father means to share the Father's love for others (1 John 4:7-11). If I am going to get to know the Lord, I am also going to be confronted with a God who dearly loves those people around me—my family, friends, neighbors, business associates, acquaintances, and even my enemies.

“ We show our knowledge of God when we accept His plan for orderly, interdependent, loving relationships. ”

I might like to live in isolation, but I can't do it if I'm going to grow in my relationship with God. Knowing God doesn't mean just knowing *about* Him; it means entering into Him—into His thoughts, His heart, His sacrificial love.

The apostle John wrote:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7,8).

Those who love God are dependent on one another. In Ephesians 4, Paul made it clear that our vertical relationship with God is accompanied by many horizontal relationships. He pictured each child of God as a member of the body of Christ. Each part has a function. Just as the eye, ear, mouth, and foot make distinct contributions to our physical bodies, so each believer plays a distinct role in the church, the body of Christ. When every

part does its share, the whole body receives the benefit (see 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12).

Even though we have received a complete salvation in Christ, there is another sense in which we are not complete without relating to and serving one another. We need one another just as much as the mouth needs the eye and the eye needs the hand. This is the outworking of our salvation. We might think we are independent spirits who can do just fine on our own, but we will soon discard that idea as we grow in our knowledge of God.

“ We need one another just as much as the mouth needs the eye and the eye needs the hand. ”

Those who love God will submit to one another. In Ephesians 5:21, Paul said that we are to submit to one another in the fear of God. In the counsel that follows, his words become very specific. He tells us that:

- Wives are to serve their husbands as a means of serving the Lord (5:22).
- Husbands should lovingly surrender their own interests in behalf of their wives as Christ lovingly surrendered His interests in behalf of the church (5:25-28).
- Children are to obey their parents in the Lord (6:1).
- Servants are to be obedient to their masters as a means of serving the Lord (6:5,6).
- Masters are to show consideration for their servants out of deference to the Lord (6:9).

The message comes through clearly. Knowing God and His love (Eph. 3:14-21) means that we will lovingly and submissively serve others. As we trust God and obediently serve others, we will discover deep within our own souls the rightness, wisdom, and power of the love of Christ.

Obediently channeling God's love for others enables us to begin to experience the meaning of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19.

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Are You Close . . . Yet So Far Away?

It is possible to be close to Christ, yet so far from Him. We have an illustration of this with the 12 apostles. They had the greatest opportunity for what we usually think of as a personal relationship with Him. Yet even in that inner circle, there was one, probably the most trusted member of the group (for he kept the money), who never really had the kind of connection with Christ that we are talking about. In fact, he knew Jesus' habits well enough to lead His captors to His garden hideaway. He even knew Christ well enough to kiss Him. But he didn't know Christ as his Savior and Lord.

As a result, the "keeper of the money" never had the kind of personal, Christ-centered relationship with God that is available to us today. We can know Christ more intimately than Judas ever did, even though we've never personally shaken the hand of the Carpenter-Teacher from Nazareth.

As far as we are concerned, it all starts with a choice. A yes or a no. Are you willing to enter into a relationship with God through Christ? (John 1:12). Are you convinced that you desperately need the forgiveness He offers? (Acts 13:38,39). Can you see that Christ was not merely a man, but that He was God in the flesh who died on the cross for your sins? Do you believe that He rose from the dead to intercede personally for all who will trust Him as Savior and Lord? (Rom. 10:9-13). This relationship is a gift—a spiritual, Christ-centered, dominant, mutually felt, growing, shared gift of God.



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